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< Chapter Eight: Angelique V (/en/story/127504/chapter-seven-zara-and-david-iii-724543/)

Fall, 2030 - Winter, 2031

"If you were to ask me, the most amazing part of it all is they closing so firmly, as if they were expecting to come back one day."

"Maybe they really thought they could

return."

"No. When cities went empty was because they were already completely under Amere's control and almost always they ended up burnt to crisps. Only a fool could have thought they could come back to their home."

"Maybe they were fools."

"Maybe..."

"And how did the ones that are inside right now get it?"

"I think they got it through a window, or maybe they found another door."

I don't mind wearing warm, bulky or heavy clothes, but Angelique hates it. If I let her be, she would walk on the snow wearing some shorts, a long t-shirt and only her cloak covering her from the icy wind. But allowing her to go out like that would also mean having to take care of her lying on the bed with a cold for a whole week and... while watching her look at me from the bed with those puppy eyes sounds a bit tempting, I don't want to see

her that sick. Not again.

And so, both of us were accordingly protected against the cold weather. That leather jacket she was wearing was originally too bulky for her liking, and then I had to mess around a bit to find the way to make it comfortable for combat, and now it has some belts around the arms and forearms, and around the waist and chest too. It looks better than it sounds, really. I'm even quite proud of how good it looks on Angelique. Her hair is loose, sometimes, and she doesn't hide it inside the jacket; she doesn't wear the hood if I don't tell her to. She's so good at avoiding rules.

"And if the ones who closed it all were those who are hiding inside?"

“They should have found all the keys to do that and that's unlikely”

“That's true...”

“Anyway, it's closed. We'll take the door down”

“We will make a lot of noise”

“That's better than just letting it be. Besides, we've done this a lot of times before”

“We didn't bring an axe or hammer”

“Not a problem. If we're gonna storm in anyway, I'll just shoot the lock off”

We both looked up and sighed at the same time. Such a sigh was quickly carried away by the wind, and covered by the soft snow that fell... and fell, and fell down until it was enough to cover our soles.

That was an apartment building of around twenty stories tall. All cracked, unsafe-looking and with all those white walls sprinkled. It looked robust, nevertheless. Just a few of the dozens of windows were still intact, and most of those were covered by curtains from the inside, so we weren't able to look inside. Moreover, all the windows on the lower floors were planked from inside.

Angelique was carrying her Rattler. Hm,

I might have not mentioned that one before. MCX Rattler, an automatic short-barreled rifle, 5.56mm. It's small and light, not weighing much more than the UMP that she always carries, but with higher power. Surely, I had to teach her how to handle a stronger caliber, but I have already talked about how good she is at learning.

And another thing, I know it might get a bit confusing reading me describing so many weapons, but it's not a lie that Angelique and I have a small armory at our home. It's not a big deal, it simply works like this: we find an hostile, he carries a firearm, we kill him and we take his gun. In the end we're just saving up what we steal from other people, and that's precisely why our equipement has so much variety. If only we had an effective way to get ammo...

"Aren't we talking a bit too loud?"

"What's worth for being silent at this point? If they realized you saw them, they

probably already know we're coming for them and they are ready for that. Being honest, I'd rather let them be if I knew they are not going to assault us first, but I can't take anything for granted."

The girl simply let her shoulders fall down, trying to understand my reluctance. But when she saw the tip of my gun aiming at the gun, her white hands, covered by those gray gloves, gripped on the rifle.

"Alright... remember the order: direct cleanse."

Ah...

As always, I began telling the story from the end and not from the beginning,

Let me recap.

One day before...

...

It's never clear who's gonna take care of the cooking everyday, and so the one who ends up doing it is the who feels like it. Well, that morning I was busy, taking care of our equipment in one of the many basements the mansion has. This one is precisely arranged for us to store and maintenance our guns. This is also where I teach Angelique how to solve any problems that might happen when handling a firearm, and how to fix them by herself. But now right at that moment, since she was in the kitchen.

When I was in the military school, one of my teachers once said that safety rules were made by someone that saw another someone get their head blown off out of carelessness and decided that was not the best way to go off, and so after analyzing what exactly happened they wrote down what one was not supposed to do. And that's how safety was born, and you should respect it. That tale has never left my head and so, even if I really wanted to do it, I did not smoke inside our improvised workplace, and I just held a lighted off

cigarette between my lips. I'm a responsible person, or so I like to think.

On top of the table in front of me laid down a gun. That UMP45 I have mentioned so many times before, completely disassembled. Around the many separate parts, my tools. Most of them improvised by memory, built with stuff I could find in the city. A couple of bottles of oil prepared by myself, brushes, rods, rags, more and more brushes, and a water bottle. The water is there to drink it if I begin dehydrating. In that room, in that very tiny basement, we also have the boilers that allows us to have hot water, and so the room temperature tends to go up and I sweat like a pig, even my hair gets wet; the worst part of not cutting my hair is that the sweat tends to make it stick to the back of my neck, and it feels gross. But I highly doubt someone is interested in the issues I get myself into just because I just don't feel like cutting my hair.

What else, what else...

Well, on the wall just behind that table -

I mean the one I have right in front of me when I sit down to work- there's a screwed toolbox where I store my stuff. Just aside of it, at the right, there's the stairs that lead to the ground floor, and by the other side of the stairs there's another table just in the corner of the room. All over that room there are a lot of boxes, shelves and some more places where I put out anything related to my guns. Parts that need some fixing, ammo, more oils, more tools... and guns. Some... decent amount of guns. In the shelve behind the only chair in the room I put the guns I have ammo for, and in the one at the left I put up all those trophy guns I mantain but it's extremely unthinkable to find ammo for, and I just keep them because it would hurt too much to throw away. A noticeable piece is that P90. I only have a single mag and 23 5.7 rounds for it, so it's practically useless in combat, but I couldn't get rid of it. I got that one when I stormed into a- no, I won't spoil that story.

Back on topic, we've got revolvers from .22 to .44, pistols up to .45, three

submachineguns, and a couple of assault, tactical and even a pair of sniper rifles. It sounds unbelievable, but I have a story for each one of those weapons. Some I can use, and some not, either because I don't have ammo or because they are broken and I'm not able to find the pieces to repair them.

The ceiling is low, the walls are gray and the floor is made of wood. At first there was just a single lamp hanging from the center of the room, so I set up another one near the table so it's easier to work without burning my own eyes. I'm good enough with just one of my senses deteriorated.

"But I do this mostly because I'm bored, not because I really need to do it..."

It's not like these guns were mistreated all the time, not anymore, and it's not like they were used constantly day after day and they needed to be taken care off all the time, and neither like we dirtied them to camouflage them or while we escape... not

anymore. I only do this out of pleasure and to kill time, because trust me, reader, living everyday without any work nor anything important to do... alright, maybe generalizing is not a good thing, but at least I think this kind of life is pretty stressful.

While I used a cloth to wipe off the oil on the cannon, my vision dazzled and vanished off sometimes, letting me watch that naked submachinegun on the table and my dirty hands, and at the same time those still vivid memories of myself doing that very same thing, but with my old provided AUG, on top of a blanket on the ground inside of a tent in the frontier between Switzerland and Austria. That night the bombs were dropping close, real close... it's true, I was scared to death, but it was just a matter of trusting our intel service, because they assured we had not been discovered and those being smashed to bits were the Swiss. Zara was sitting in front of me, doing the very same thing with her own rifle, trying to come up with some chit-chatting in order to make us

forget the gritty reality. David was sleeping. That motherfucker was sleeping as if nothing was happening out there. It's not like he went to bed to ignore the bombings, but he was already sleeping when the show began and the explosions didn't manage to wake him up. Even the damn floor trembled, but David didn't wake up.

I was living in my own memories like an old man right about meeting death, but the knocking on the door at the end of the stairs brought me back to the Earth.

"Hm? What is it?"

I heard the door being open, and I tilted my torso to the right to look, climbing up the stairs with my sight. At the top was Angelique, holding the knob with a hand and looking rather worried... no, it was more like a mash of anger, frustration and a little bit of worry.

"Gas..."

"Ah, shit..."

I dropped everything on the table, lazily wiped my hands, climbed up the stairs, exchanged a couple of words with Angel, we both sighed at the same time and walked to the kitchen.

"I thought it was almost full."

"It is my fault. Since I haven't been cooking lately I didn't check on it and..."

The kitchen is big, but, to be honest, I spent all my willingness to describe a room talking about the workshop so I'll just talk shortly about the place where we cook. Just your basic, everyday cooking equipment, but bigger. A nicely sized fridge that's almost empty and shelves and shelves and shelves and shelves on the walls of the room. It's all wooden furniture that's a bit too fancy to my liking, white walls and a big metalic kitchen bell above the stoves. For the rest, use your imagination, because I just don't feel like

wasting my words and time describing a kitchen that looks like... hey, that's perfect. You want more details? Just think of a kitchen that you'd see in the house of the duke of a fairly rich nation, or a not-so-relevant noble, or a corrupt politician that doesn't want to attract too many eyes. That's a perfect description. The only difference from those magnific views in your head right now, is that we don't have natural gas running through the pipes so we need to use gas cylinders to heat our meals. Where do we get those from? From the bottling plant, of course.

"What time is it right now, Angel?"

"Maybe... around eleven in the morning."

"This will take our whole day..."

"The weather does not look very calm to the north."

"And if tomorrow rains then that means two or three days without eating warm food."

"Then..."

"Yeah, we're leaving right now. Go put on a coat and take the Rattler for you and... and you already know what else to take, I don't need to repeat it."

"Just the 92 for you?"

"Yeah, yeah. Quickly, let's not waste time."

I put on my coat, set my handgun, softly hit Angelique on the back because I saw her boomed about having to use that tight jacket and then we both walked out of the mansion through the west door. Patience, later I'll explain why I didn't bring my rifle with me.

I'm not really sure if it was just chance or some kind of safety perimeter was established for some time around the place, but that street that hits on the mansion perpendicularly by the west side is in a much better shape than the rest of the town. Sure, there's always crumbled down buildings, but not on the same intensity. I hope I'm being clear.

The floor is almost unscathed, there

aren't that many ruined buildings nor abandoned vehicles. The houses and stores look entire... it's weird, but appreciated because if we are in the dire need of some object we know we might find it around here. But don't take it wrong, it's nowhere close to a shopping center. It's just fairly better than the rest of the destroyed city.

At least, walking around here doesn't feel as hopeless.

"If we had a cart or something we could bring many at the same time and have them on stock so this doesn't happen."

"Can't we build one?"

"Well... wood is easy to collect, we could just break apart some furniture, but I haven't seen a single car wheel that's not depressingly flat or straight up cut. Otherwise I could build a wheel, but I doubt I'd get that right."

"Then..."

"Yeah, at least for the moment, this is the only way."

"Can't I help you taking a second one?"

"They are too heavy for you. Besides, someone's got to hold the rifle, right?"

She pouted lightly and I sighed with a smile. I turned around and the way ahead, as always, was long, but we could see the bottling plant.

"I don't think our life here is that bad, you know? But this... this is definitely the worst part. We have hot water, tons of clothing, some amusement, electricity; if only we didn't have to walk this much whenever we run out of gas... still, I think it's a very small con if we take into consideration all the pros. A perfect 360° panoramic view, food reserves, water. We're lucky, or we're maybe too good at picking places. What do you think?"

And Angelique wasn't by my side when I turned my head to see her.

"Hm?"

Many, many steps behind, she stared up at that tall apartment building.

"Ah... could you please tell me when you're gonna do that? It was very cute when you were younger but now it's just frustrating."

That was a lie. I still think it's cute.

I walked back over my footprints and stood by her side, trying to find that thing that caught her attention.

"Did you see something?"

"No..."

Making a facial gesture I've only rarely saw her show before, Angel avoided my gaze and frowned a bit before walking ahead of me, following the route as always.

"I saw nothing strange."

"..."

That made me doubt, but neither I found anything weird looking upon all the building's windows, so I just shook away that doubt and kept walking.

…

The travel was long, boring and eventless. A tedious four hours long walk to arrive, and the only thing that managed to distract us for a second was seeing the sky getting cloudy.

"Do we know how many left of them there are?"

"No."

"Well, we're not starting today. I'm already tired enough."

Just like pretty much any other facilities, that plant was abandoned when people left the city. And, obviously, they didn't have the time nor the means to take all the

machinery with them, neither the resources or products they made there. When we found it, it felt like being a portuguese merchant of the XV century discovering a new route that could take him to the India faster than any other. It was perfect. We didn't need to resort to firewood anymore to warm our food, nor eating those horrible, cold conserves I hate so much. Since then, what we do is simple: I carry a tank on my shoulders using both hands and walk home while that girl protects me from any danger. Can you see it now? The name Angel fits her like a glove. Although... to be honest, we've never had any major issues visiting the plant. Maybe one or two dogs getting annoying, but that can be easily solved firing at the ground almost all the times. So I repeated the same as always, grumbling as I felt the weight on my shoulders and walked out. Angelique skipped past me, showing me her back.

"There are two rooms full of them, we should not worry."

"Two rooms of them are too few, Angel."

"Too few?"

"How much more time do you think we'll live in the mansion? To me... it will be long, very long until we leave. That, if we ever get to leave."

"..."

"Once we run out of tanks, we'll need to collect wood and stuff again, so we bether make the best use of what we have now."

"I guess so..."

Maybe feeling down -or maybe not, I don't know-, she replied without turning around and checked the chamber of her gun.

…

She looks so professional. Is she the one who's got a natural talent as a soldier, or is it me the one who's really good teaching? One way or the other, her abilities speak

for themselves. The way she gently turns her rifle, those discrete head motions when she's exploring the zone, the concentration in her eyes... we didn't even talk, I just wanted to watch her back as we walked.

Those were another four hours walking, but this time carrying a damn thirty-kilograms tank on my back. A torture. I'm not Heracles, and my body is not as sharp as it used to be some years ago, so taking breaks was more than necessary. When we got back to that certain spot on the streets, close to home...

"Ah... my back is killing me..."

"..."

"Hm?"

Angelique didn't reply, and she stood in her place one more time. When I followed her gaze, I found that same apartment building. She noticed me stopping too, and hastly marched forward like it was nothing.

Angel, not only I have three times your

training and four times your habituation, but I also have five times your experience. I know when things aren't going alright, or when somebody finds anything strange but doesn't want to say it out loud.

I let her be.

We walked home, but night arrived before us. We closed to door, I set up the new tank and let the day finish normally. Nothing to remark. But the next morning...

…

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I jumped on her early in the morning as I was supposed to if I really wanted to scold her. I woke her up when the sun wasn't completely up yet, I hurried her into getting dressed and took her to the living room. There I told her to sit on one of the couches and stood in front of her. Maybe surprised, or maybe not -you can never know with this girl-, she seemed to

understand right away what I meant.

"You saw something on those apartments, didn't you? You think I'm that easy to deceive, Angelique?"

"But-"

"You can't justify it!"

"W-we did not have the tactical advantage. It was risky and-"

"And it was a better idea not to tell me and letting me walk two times across the same spot like an easy target?"

"..."

"It's fine for you to have your own ideas, Angel. But don't even think about skipping over what I know! What would have we done if the second time they sweeped us from a window we couldn't even see? What would hiding such relevant info from me had been worth for?"

There was no response. Her eyes sticked to the floor, her fingers interwined on her

knees and a sight of sadness and guilt on her face.

It's not like I enjoy doing this, but if I wasn't clear on the grave mistake she made...

"This is will be the last time, Angelique. If you see or hear something you'll tell me right away and I will be the one making the choices."

"..."

I clenched my fists, vaguely angry upon not getting any words from her but, before getting carried away, I just took a hand to her head and, roughly, yet not violently, I made her look into my eyes.

"Roger?"

"Roger..."

. . .

There's a map in my room, or maybe I

should say a sketch. It's a vital piece of intel I made myself, showing every important area of the city that we have found out of. It's big, taking half a wall both in height and width and it's never finished since I keep adding new pieces of paper whenever I find a new place. Everything's there. The bottling plant, the not-checked-yet important buildings, the zoo, the avenues, the residental area, the industrial area, the main park, the empty Amere reservoir, the refinery, the hospitals and clinics, the university, the mental health center, the commune... and a lot of more things I'm yet to tell you about. I'll do so, if I think it's necessary or interesting.

"I thought it'd be rain, but it ended up being snow."

"Does it benefit us?"

"I'd have preferred the water. Those departments are... somewhat close to the commune, and the sounds of the rain would have covered the tentative fire."

Angelique got closer to the X I drew on the map and looked at its surroundings for a moment.

"We still need to explore so many places..."

"We can't afford breaking into as many buildings as we want. Our ammo and resources are limited, and pointless fights are to be avoided."

"And yet..."

"If we are capable of determine is some place is safe without getting to close, then we can roll the dice and try to find something useful inside."

"What are we going to do now?"

"Well, we are already stepping almost blindly into unchecked terrain so we'll make use of the situation to look inside."

"I will bring my backpack."

"Good idea."

She turned like she wanted to say

something else, but she swallowed her words and I lighted up a cigarette before continuing.

Where do we get so many cigarettes from? Good question.

"Back on topic. The building is rahter rectangular and generic, not that big, but pretty tall so I guess it must have only two entry doors. The thing is we can't reach what could be called the laterals and backdoor, so we can only barge through the front door."

"Always avoid main doors."

"Hm?"

"That is something you said long ago, in France. We were thinking about breaking into a hou-"

"Wait."

I took a moment just to breath in and not smile out of the bliss that brought me acknowledging my tuitions and teachings were not just wasted on Angelique.

"Yes, that's right. You must always avoid main doors whenever it's possible. Unfortunately, we don't have another choice here."

"A front assault."

"Yes, a frontal assault."

"Like in Belgium."

"Like in... Belgium?"

"Yes. Shortly before crossing to Luxemburg we were careless and our bags were taken by two strangers and the only way to take them back was storming into a storehouse that-"

"Yeah, I remember. But we can't use the same tactic this time."

"So no starting fires."

"No starting fires."

Maybe she wanted to let me know that it would be the easiest way to dabble in and that's why she frowned a bit, but she didn't say anything else.

There was nothing else to talk, and nothing else to settle. We loaded our guns, we fixed our equipment and we went hunting.

...

And that takes us back to square one. That was quite the long introduction, wasn't it?

"Breaking!"

Without further ado, I shoot two times at the lock on the main door of the building and a couple of times up and down just in case there were some extra locks inside.

I didn't need to yell out every single order for Angelique to know what I needed her to do. When I kicked the door open and took cover to reload my Benelli, Angel quickly took my place and sweeped the first room with her iron sights before taking cover too.

"Clean."

I cocked a round into the chamber with the slide as I nodded. Then I turned around and barged inside, I took a couple steps in besides my partner and, when it was obvious that the building hall was empty, we both kept quiet.

"..."

"I can't even hear footsteps."

"It's a large building. If their base is upstairs there's no way for us to hear them."

"Alez..."

I spinned on my own foot to look at her, and I understood that weird tone of her voice.

"I do not get it..."

Angel closed her distance to the marks

on the floor that suggested that years ago there used to be a desk there, and some other furniture too, and then she picked up some rotten wood up from it, arching her eyebrows like a little girl.

"There is nothing here, Alez."

And it was really nothing. Not even the frames of the windows, nor the reception furniture, or the lamps hanging from the ceiling or the wiring that would keep them on. It was like the room of a house just bought, except for the dirt. Two hallways opened up from the wall opposite of the main door, and between them laid some wide stairs, in the middle there was an elevator so old that I wouldn't have stepped inside it even if they told there was a chocolate cake waiting for me inside; I really miss those.

What were the boards and locks for if there was nothing left inside? And it's not like some bandits could undress a building like this, and even if they could, why would they do that?

We exchanged some awkward looks and checked into the security, service and even hosting rooms from the lower floors, but everything looked just the same: deprived of anything.

"This place..."

"This shit has zero sense. And I hate not knowing what's exactly happening."

"I am getting nervous."

"Yeah, me too."

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll go upstairs. I'm starting to think you just imagined seeing something here, but seeing how mysterious this place is, now I want to explore it."

"Roger."

"..."

"I will stick very close."

"No, no, Angel. There's little room and-"

"I will stick very close not bothering you to maneuver."

I stopped just after climbing two steps and I looked down at her trying to say 'what's into you now?', but she simply averted her gaze with some enviable speed. She's cold, expressionless and hard to read, but I know her too well!

"I told you not to read scary books if you were going to end up believing them."

"I don't believe them. I have never seen a ghost or anything alike, so I don't have any reason to believe such things."

"Then, why does your lower lip tremble when you stop talking?"

"Ah..."

I sighed annoyingly and let go of it so she didn't get mad. Suggestion is such a powerful weapon. And I'm not talking about watching a scary movie and not daring to walk at night into your own home. No, no. Suggestion is WAY more dangerous than that, and it's results can be spectacular; both good and bad. If you know where your enemy is, but his base is

too hard to assault and you don't know what to do, you just need to harass him day and night with attacks of all kinds. Effective strikes, strikes that you know that won't be effective, stealth, explosions, dynamism and stoicism. That is, reader, psychological warfare, and it's very base is suggestion, which will make your enemy submit before you even plan a final attack.

We walked up stars. Infinite, unending stairs. And we stopped to clear floor after floor. And all of them looked the same. A hall and two long hallways by the sides of the stairs.

"Ugh..."

"What's in your mind?"

"I would have liked not to get into this building ever."

"Ninth floor..."

"And not even a damn closet at sight. They took everything. It's tremendous work for a team with cranes and all that, just imagine how impossible it would be

for people that at much could have a couple of cars."

"And the comune?"

"They don't mess with this stuff."

I placed a hand on a wall to rest my weight and caressed that piece of clothing hanging from the window with the back of my other hand.

"And, even so, they didn't take the curtains..."

"They didn't want anyone to look inside?"

"Why would they care? There's nothing here to steal."

"Nothing."

"Not a single thing."

Just pulling weakly from it, all the rusted locks broke in half almost at the same time and the curtain fell down without making noise. The pale sunlight, tainted by the clouds, illuminated the room... althought

there was nothing to illuminate. I leaned onto the glass to look outside.

"Will they return, Alez?"

"..."

I knew who she was talking about. She wasn't talking about the former residents of the building, or they owners because, being in such a high floor and looking outside, that lost relevance. Angelique watched far away. Leaning against the frame of the window with her forearms, her eyes wandered lost into the landscape of a dead city. An inert city, covered in snow and rust. Will people return to populate these lands one day? To restore what once was their home? What kept them away for so long? It was already not very common for us to walk into Amere forces, how much of the horrible, massive war I had told her about was still onging? I know all those questions remained inside her head. Her... those blue pearls were mirrored in the glass, and they distracted

me. I tried not to gaze away from that polis forgotten by the world. The skyscrapers by the other side of the center of the city, the residential area, the comercial one and the industrial one... we could see everything from up there, and everything looked as silent, calm and peaceful as always. I wanted to keep watching things that way, I wanted to appreciate the war as the result and rest of a fruitless operation that humans performed because they didn't manage to properly calculate the correct way to reach peace, but her eyes didn't let me. Like a ball spinning at high speed doing big circles inside a funnel until gravity forces it to fall at the center, or like a celestial body which dark end was to be catched by a dark hole, my sight ended up drifting by itself towards Angelique's eyes reflected on the window. They looked... always so reposeful. Always serene and immovable, but they are so impossible to ignore. Just like... like... the most beautiful statue in a plaza full of attractions and banalities of all kinds; that statue is the stillest and least

noisy element of them all, but it's impossible for you to go speechless once you walk by and see it. That's just the way I see Angelique's gaze.

"Were cities fun, Alez?"

"I don't know. Never stopped to think about that."

Out of the corner of my eyes I noticed her wings being born once again. I didn't move my pupils away out of fear of seeing them disappear.

Statues...

That's how she looked, resting against the window with a melancholic look in her face and a pair of wings on her back, she looked like a piece of art made of limestone of the most exquisite quality. But it didn't last too long, for when I blinked they vanished again for who knows how long.

"I see..."

I caressed the hair of the angel that follows me all around and issued the order to continue with the search.

We walked up some more floors and we found a fire extinguisher. Why do I mention it? Becuase it was literally the only thing we found in that building from the first floor up to the thirteenth floor. We were quite surprised. We even double checked it didn't have any bombs or that it wasn't a trap. In the end we took it from the wall and threw it out of the window because we still weren't feeling safe around it. There are all kinds of surveillance equipment and I didn't want to take the risk. Exaggerated? Probably, but there's a reason I'm still alive and so many others aren't.

We stepped into the fifteenth floor and she stopped abruptly hanging her head just a bit and lifting the rifle up to her chest. I walked in front of her and hunched over just enough to be at her height. She looked at me and with those precious eyes

she signaled the hallway by the right, then she raised her eyebrows once, meaning she had heard something. We don't even need words to understand each other anymore.

I nodded slowly and each of us tilted into a different hallway. I took the left one, it was bleak, even void. I walked back to her and found her very focused, peeking around the corner. I patted her back and she pointed at her hear, and then at the end of the hallway.

I peeked too, hoping to find some movement or trail that followed that sound I couldn't hear, but everything I saw was a door partly opened to the inside of a room, unlike all the others which were still closed.

Angelique and I looked at each other and we both decided what to do: advance, secure the entrance to that room and then break in with completely hostile intentions.

Our weapons were ready, our hands were where they should be, we were focused, our backs properly stretched, we rocked

the ideal balance, without any overweights, a formidable grip, and our intentions were... maybe still unkown.

The sole of my boot striked on the door and it broke it in half. Not because I'm that strong, but because it was of such poor quality. The wooden parts fell to the sides along with the hinges and the hundreds of disperse fragments, the dust and wood particles invaded the place at the same time that our muzzles presented themselves inside. The sunlight hit on us as soon as we looked in and it made me squint, as if trying to sharpen my aim, but...

"The curtain's not there."

"It's empty, just like the rest of the rooms."

"But..."

Angelique left her rifle hanging, although I didn't pay too much attention because I was looking for anything strange or something that could catch my eye.

Literally anything that wasn't those stupid white walls. And then I heard a noise... a very light noise, I almost thought it was my imagination. I could figure it at all, it was a wet noise, as if a viscous object was making it. It was also followed by some... ah, it's hard to describe, some short groans almost unaudible, drowned and hardfully made.

"Alez, the curtain..."

Yes, it was there. The curtain was on the ground, in front of the window, mercilessly illuminated by the king star. It looked like a gift from above. Yes, it appeared like that curtain and what was resting on top of it had been gently brought from the sky until they were dearly placed on the floor by some invisible hands. That... if the scene wasn't so sad.

"Is this what you saw...?"

There was no answer.

Looking down at what was apparently the source of all this mess, I put my weapon again without a single doubt. No, I didn't put it away. It's mostly like I dropped it for the sling to hold it. I got closer, almost stepping on it, and I crouched slowly. I hanged the shotgun on my back and I... moved carefully one of the edges of the curtain.

"Are all of them dead...?"

"No, not all of them."

On top of the blue fabric laid a feline. An adult female cat extremely malnourished that must have died some hours before. Resting against her belly were her children, all of them lifeless except for a single kitten who gripped firmly onto the nipple of her dead mother trying to, meaninglessly, get some food. It didn't even smell, and the big body wasn't even totally cold.

"I can only imagine... that what you saw,

Angelique, was maybe this cat peeking out the windows, maybe trying to find an exist she never found."

"And she brought the curtains down?"

"It was maybe already in the ground by the time she came here. I don't know, it's not important."

"It's a tall building..."

"I don't think that was the cause. Maybe... maybe these creatures were born inside here, and her mother didn't dare to get too far from them as to get out of the building and she just tried to find food around the place."

"I see..."

"And this one here..."

It wasn't me who picked up the last kitten alive and took it from the body of her mother, that was Angel. She brought it carefully to her chest, holding it with both his hands and making a slightly thoughtful face. The cat was also weak and

almost lifeless, and it only squirmed lazily, now gripping on my partner's fingertips, trying to drink from them. It was so, so small... it hadn't even opened its eyes yet, and its ears' pinna were still hidden. It showed a vaguely orange fur with white lights, it was... I'm not going to lie, its little bones were easily distinguished through its skin and it was ugly, it was horrible.

"You gave it all right until the last moment cat mama, didn't you?"

I sighed in a low voice as I covered with that fabric again, and I stood up discouraged.

"It's pointless. I hate saying we came in vain, but we at least scratched away a bad chance and..."

Angelique wasn't listening.

"Angelique, that is..."

I feel like she did it hoping I didn't see because it was a really subtle movement, but she used two of her fingers to calmly caress the head of the tiny animal. She didn't look like a regular young girl touched by the sight of a small animal like one would expect, but the gaze that rested on that kitten was a compassionate one, which maybe reflected some sympathy.

"Okay. I'll leave it here."

She spoke in a single voice, and only when she was just about dropping that little being where it was before, practically letting it die, I turned around and walked to the exit.

"The cat comes with us."

"Uh?"

I feel like I'm already getting used to her suirprised reactions, and that makes a bit sad. I guess I'm a bit insatiable.

"Maybe..."

"..."

"We have a lot of preserved food, cans and stuff. That... that might attract a lot of rats, so having a hunter in the house is not a bad idea. I once heard rats and mice run away simply by smelling the scent of cats passing by. Those animals are really useful."

"With us..."

"Yeah. But you're gonna take care of it. It will be a sort of new responsability. You're gonna feed it, clean it and all that. It's just another mission, Angelique, don't sleep on it. Even if it sounds like an excuse to leave it all on your hands.

Not a word. Simply following me step by step without getting it all, and maybe not feeling comfortable enough to question me, she walked behind me.

"And... will it have a name?"

"That's not of my business. I'm not even going to talk to that furball because it's not of my business. Told you so, it's your responsability."

And we left.

As we walked away from that so tall building, I turned around to look at it. There was no danger in the end, but we never, ever found out what the hell happened inside of it or how they emptied the whole place like that. But... what can I say? Mystery and ghost stories are not my forté, so I admit I wouldn't care at all if it wasn't because I'm mad that I could never pull such a feat off. That's it. That's the end of it. I won't dwell on it anymore, I can't discover all the secrets of this town.

. . .

As for the cat, he was named "Nale" and I don't know why. And, also, I wrote this whole chapter with him sleeping on my lap.

I let myself be tamed by a fifteen centimeters tall feline.

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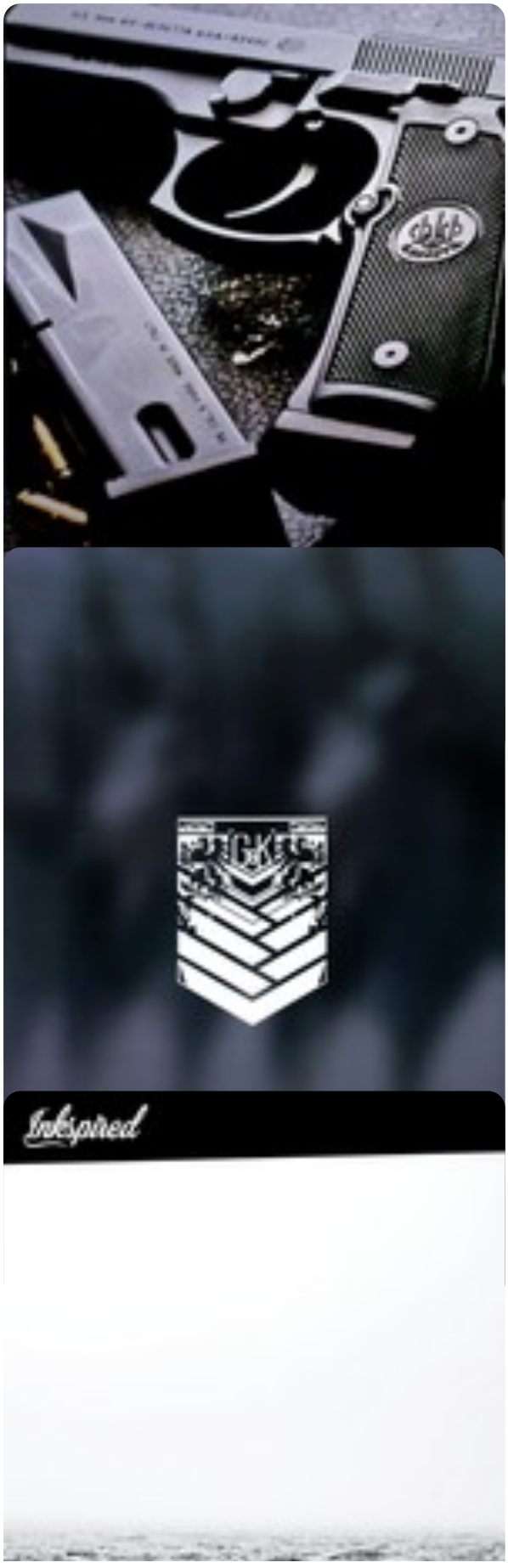

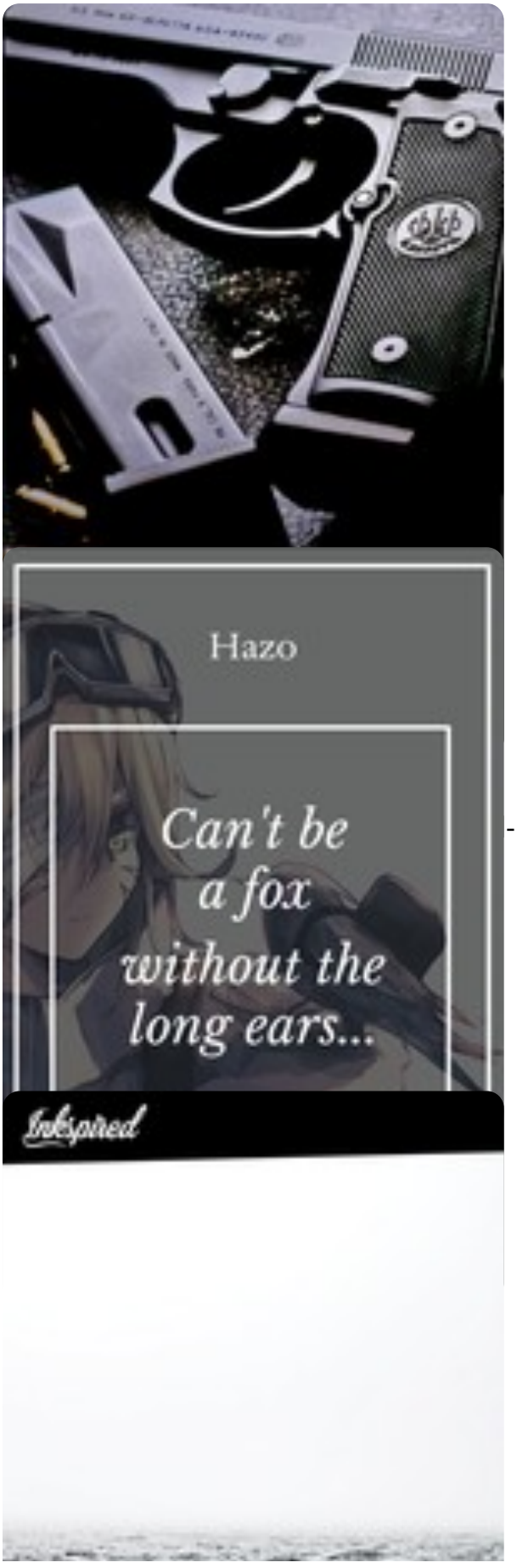

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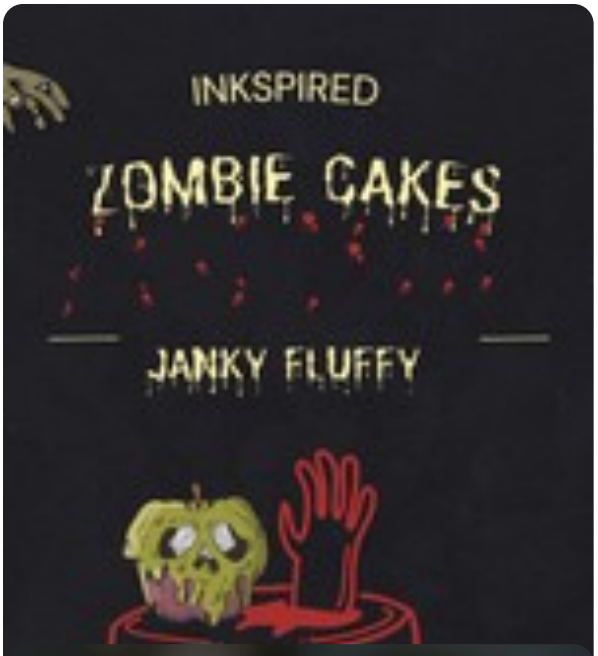

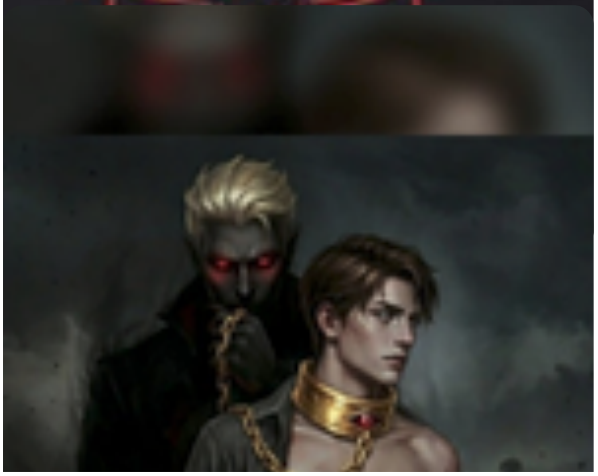

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